

Global Game Jam Cross-cultural Results Analysis

A Personal Study

by

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Foreword

This paper is an analysis and comparison of the games created during the Global Game Jam (GGJ) of 2009. My intent is to inspect the games created by different cultural groups (ie. countries) across the world and identify similarities and differences to one another in their results. In preparation, I played over 110 of the games created during the Game Jam, and studied the basics of a further 60 through screen-shots and descriptions. Twice this number were created during the GGJ, but my ability to play certain executable formats was limited by my resources. A Mac OSX user, I have no access to a reliable, Windows-based computer, and went so far as to purchase the Windows emulator Parallels so I could operate in both Windows XP and Mac OSX at the same time (making it much easier to play games on the applicable OS as I encountered them). Limitations of the Parallels program, however, prevented my from playing any XNA titles, and a larger majority of the remaining games were either broken, improperly submitted/packaged or corrupted.

Regardless, I was able to review games created in every single participating country, including every participating city that particular country had with *one* exception. The United States included 23 different participating locations, and I'm afraid time did not allow me to play more than a quarter of the USA's submitted games, which still amounted to 8 cities worth. This was almost triple the next leading country's number (Canada with 3 locations), so I still managed to give a fair representation of the USA's overwhelming involvement in the GGJ.

My evaluation of these games was broken down into 5 main categories:

Style was evaluated as the overall aesthetics and artist goals of the game. This reflects the general creative and artistic vision of the developers, and to a lesser degree their artist skill. I tried my best to consider what their artistic goals were over the actual quality of their aesthetics, but sometimes one influenced the other too severely to keep them separated.

Execution was evaluated as the level of polish and completion the game achieved. Balanced controls, proper screen flow, complete game mechanics, and easy to execute files were among the criteria I considered to be positive examples. All of these, however, were independent of the quality of gameplay: even if the game was terrible and frustrating, if the delivery of the product was sufficient they were given good grades for execution.

Content was evaluated as the context given to the experience, including characters, story, message, immersion and any applicable metaphors for the gameplay. A category I anticipated would be a lower priority for many development teams as a result of sheer

haste in creation, this translates to maturity in the design and the appropriateness of the context for the chosen gameplay.

Gameplay was a straightforward evaluation: the quality of the game experience. Is the game fun? Engaging? Challenging? Rewarding? Does it possess re-playability? Highly subjective qualities to judge by, but I trust that my knowledge will carry me through with an acceptable degree of accuracy in my analysis.

Integration is the final evaluation category. Unlike the previous 4, this is dependent on the Game Jam itself. Integration is evaluated on how accurately the game was able to follow the GGJ's theme: "As long as we have each other, we will never run out of problems." This is judged completely independently from the other aspects of the game; should gameplay be tedious and the graphics unappealing, their concept may still hold truer to the theme than a more engaging and enjoyable game. Also note: I am judging their use of theme from what is apparent in the game itself, not from supporting text in readme documents or from the GGJ website.

Similarities in Results

On Style

Immediately upon launching most games, one thing became obvious: whatever artistic talent and effort many teams possessed was almost entirely dedicated to the opening title screen. Many teams lacked any consistency in their gameplay graphics (even contradicting their title screen graphics), but they spent the time to at least create an attractive title screen to submit for promotion of their game on the GGJ website. This is an understandable action: creating a single attractive title screen image takes much less work than designing graphics for the entire game.

Otherwise, style was all over the wall. Teams that could afford to have an artist dedicated to creating a consistent art style and polished artwork typically could only afford to because they had a strong programmer and designer already working away on functionality. If they excelled in style, they usually excelled in several other categories as well.

In regards to *specific* art styles, the only consistently employed style was a reflection of the history of video games: 8-bit graphics. With jagged pixels and a retro vibe, many teams very truthfully recreated the style of classic NES-era games. This is highly suggestive of the personal knowledge and passion of the developers: I know enough about gaming communities to understand that it takes genuine knowledge of the history of games and a love of the craft to do 8-bit graphics justice.

On Execution

A reflection of the participant's knowledge of games was very evident in almost all of the games created. While the quality of the finished products varied, they all understood the basic structure of the industry standard of games. Title screen, instruction page, gameplay, option to restart, ending/thank you screen and credits . . . they know what games typically included and followed the example to a fault. This was excellent for the player, which meant that 9 times out of 10 they knew exactly what was required to start the game. A good grasp of the basics.

Which leads me to the most common problem I encountered in execution: launching the game. I understand this is an amateur competition, and that not all the finished products will be good . . . or even playable. Roughly half of all the games created were not exported into a single, executable file, or failed to provide a folder containing all the required files along with a simple 'start.exe' to launch the game. While playing all of these games, I was forced to seek out and download about 10 different programs in order for certain games to run. Sometimes I was even required to unzip libraries after already unzipping the primary download, moving files into the correct place before the game would run. Incredibly inconvenient to me, the player, if all I wanted was a quick 5 minute play experience. I understand, once again, that these are amateur developers with only 2 days to produce a game, but having to spend 30 minutes installing a game engine for a game that didn't even make good use of the engine . . . it does little to excite the player for the (potentially) upcoming game experience. That said, I did say roughly half. The other 50% prepared easy to launch games (especially if said game was online) that took no more than 2 clicks to get started, displaying the executable file prominently in the first folder I open. The epitome of simplicity.

Now, here is something that was practically universal, and prominent at the Vancouver Game Jam: non-existent playtesting. Just like a writer that refuses to edit his own work, development teams quite obviously did not properly debug and playtest their games before submission, even titles that appeared very complete in regards to gameplay and graphics. Countless little issues about control, pacing and difficulty were often seriously flawed due to a lack of playtesting, even when the solution was as simple as editing a few integers to change the turning rate or falling speed. Simple solutions requiring only a little effort, but alas . . . never solved. This reflects both the professional skill and time management of the teams. Professionals understand how important playtesting is for the final product, while proper management will ensure that development will conclude early enough to permit tweaking through playtesting and debugging. The omission of playtesting is hardly surprising, considering that (once again) this is a competition for amateur developers.

To expand on playtesting with another observation, I discovered something very peculiar. The games with simple and stereotypical gameplay were frequently plagued with poor execution, despite the simplicity of their design. It was the *complicated* and

unique game mechanics that were well tuned and playtested. I'm not referring to gameplay that is simple in design and appears complicated due to the execution. It started complex (at least, when compared to other games) and appears simple due to the superb execution (a good example would be the Netherlands game *Splice*).

Circling back to a good grasp of the basics, there was one exception to this observation that confounded me to no end: no instructions for playing the game. Infrequently I found that some teams had completed a game with functional gameplay and moderate graphics, yet somehow managed to completely omit the instructions on how to control the game. Guessing at just what control scheme the team utilized, I usually managed to stumble upon the correct keys for the game and progress with more than a measure of frustration. Such an obvious blunder, but somehow 2 of the 5 Scottish teams from Glasgow made the same mistake. Incredible. When I made *Catnip Western* back in my first year of game design, I didn't include the instructions in the game, but instead design and printed a *detailed, full colour instruction manual* (and matching cover case and disc label). I cared that much.

Lastly, appropriateness of the platform. Once again, I understand that these are amateurs and their choice for game engine and development platform are influenced by their existing skill sets and availability. That does NOT mean that creating a full 3D game with Unity or XNA is the best choice when designing a game with only a single plane of movement. Many games I played were barely functional in the 3D engine they utilized, but the gameplay was so simple that adding a third dimension did nothing to heighten the game experience. Instead of a modestly attractive 2D Flash game with a top down perspective, I instead find a 3D game with an angled perspective that obscures my avatar (demonstrated best by the Lithuanian game *Iron Wolf*), a small and completely visible game environment and no background to decorate the empty space filling most of the screen. Many teams seem to have decided on what platform they wished to use before moving on to develop their game design, a flawed decision that the creators of the Canadian *Treelings* managed to overcome by changing their game engine from Unity to Flash.

On Content

This competition had no restrictions for participants. Although participants are naturally expected to have an interest in game design, their applicable skills and backgrounds were whatever they bring to the table. Teams may not be balanced with a full compliment of skill sets (artists, design, programmers, writers), but that only determines the quality of execution of the final product (and the scope the team is willing to challenge). Imagination, creativity and ambition are untouched by these shortcomings.

So I ask: why are there so many unoriginal concepts for context in these games? 8 different countries produced games about controlling common farmyard animals (herding them, breeding them, attacking them, protecting them, etc). In my experience,

amateur artists do not draw many animals (or if they do, they are anthropomorphic [ie. furies]). Most artists with an interest in games draw images from fantasy: knights on horseback, Anime-styled princesses, gigantic fighting robots or crude fan art from their favourite games. Yet here I find ostriches, sheep, cows, dogs, ants, bats, underwater sea creatures and more as their main characters, NPCs and enemies. I am sure that the artists on these teams would not draw these images voluntarily. I surmise, then, that (as with the Vancouver Game Jam) many teams did not have the luxury of a dedicated artist. A hobbyist maybe, but nobody competent enough to deviate from such common images as barnyard animals. It was likely that specific team members were assigned the task of art, or the task was split between team members. Not everyone knows how to draw Frank Miller inspired art, so they would need to fall back on what's familiar: animals. They're safe, easy to research for visual references and varied enough to fill all the character requirements in their game.

While animals was the most broadly employed context for characters and story, a few others were very persistent. Microscopic games about bacteria, microbes and atoms were just as broadly used as farm animals. Many countries also used 'global' themes and contexts for their games, either defending the planet against invaders or featuring wars between countries. Mankind's coexistence was a constant attempt at following the GGJ theme, but I'll discuss more on integration later.

Mirrored worlds were another popular theme, where the player would control multiple characters simultaneously with actions reflected into two different worlds (or similar variations). Relationship games were common, and there was surprisingly few games about pirates, ninjas and robots (which I expected to flood the Game Jam). A few countries even had '*A Boy and his Blob*' styled games just like a team in Vancouver did: interesting. There was also a minimal amount of senseless violence and gore in the games: there was violence, of course, but it was usually supported with an adequate context. Overall, there was a great deal of content variety (omitting the examples above), but there was one constant throughout most of it.

It was rarely very good.

Attempts at creating a game with serious and meaningful content were few and far between. Contexts for games would be as mundane as delivering pizza, a dog chasing people, racing spaceships or earning sex from a celebrity by acting as her bodyguard. Crude and unimaginative. Occasionally I encountered a title that had polished graphics and decent gameplay that allowed me to look past the poor context, but the games that had those strengths also had a solid context for the gameplay. And at best, these stronger contexts for gameplay were simply an explanation to understand the art and gameplay: even rarer was any manner of message within the context. There was no restriction to culture, either: every country was guilty of this. Often, I had little choice but to ignore the content of most games to keep myself from overanalysing them and ruining the game experience.

On Gameplay

Of all the categories (save for integration), gameplay was so incredibly varied in many regards that it almost became a shared trait. Control inputs for players were, of course, almost identical in most games, but rarely did two games apply them in exactly the same way. Not all of the minds behind these games were able to explore brave new territories of design, of course, and I saw more than my share of familiar game mechanics.

I noticed that as I played these games, it wasn't always the gameplay design that really drew me towards specific titles. While the occasional game did something really unique that earned my immediate praise, often it was the strengths of all the other categories that won me over. Interesting graphics coupled with incredible execution of a simple game design, such as the New York City game *Lucid*. Simple gameplay involving a floating boy moving upwards, where you control his left and right movement. However, the execution and aesthetics are so incredible it simply augments the gameplay.

That said, there were some persistent game genres across with no restriction to territory. Platformers and side-scrollers were like bread and butter, with even the most unique designs having platforming elements seeping through. Games about managing pairs or groups of individuals were also common, where controlling increasingly larger groups being directly proportional to the ramping difficulty. Games featuring pairs of characters either had the player controlling both at the same time (or switching between the two) or the game was multiplayer, and a second player was needed to co-operate or combat the first player. Considering the theme, this was an obvious way to follow the "as long as we have each other" concept. There were also plenty of timed survival games where the player freely navigates around a large, rectangular (or square) playing field, dodging enemies and collecting objects: a very popular choice.

The three prominent genres most games fell under were either puzzle, platforming or action, or a combination of the three. A quick hour of play on PopCap Games or Newgrounds and you would likely encounter about 90% of the gameplay in found in GGJ games. So little was memorable about most games that they began to merge together in my memory.

This makes me consider the quality of the gameplay. Engagement, reward, replayability and fun. If a game did not possess all of these traits, then they usually only possessed one of them (sometimes none). A game with fun and interesting game mechanics would not have reached the point of development to actually design challenge around those mechanics, and a game with deep and well thought out puzzles never got the kinks out of their mechanics to make the game any fun. The game *4 minutes 33 seconds of Uniqueness* caught me attention with it's interesting idea about winning by being the only one online playing that game. Engaged and seeking reward, I launched

the game and learned that there was no gameplay. You sat and stared at the window until it time was up. I don't think I need to say I was far from thrilled.

I really can't say much more on gameplay similarities: quality was typically low and design was rarely unique, and the exceptions to these cases were so few I'll be mentioning them later on. One last gameplay approach I *did* notice, though, was the use of a timer. With the restriction that a single play session last about 5 minutes, I don't think I encountered a single game that finished in roughly 5 minutes that *didn't* include a timer. If the game had no time limit, it usually could run for much longer than 5 minutes. Otherwise the limit was imposed by an ominous clock, ticking down the time. Often it didn't match the gameplay style either, as some games were not designed to be ongoing or structured into consecutive levels. A last minute solution to satisfy the restriction, I suppose.

On Integration

I feel rather bad ending on this category, since I really don't have anything positive to say. The integration of the game theme was just disappointing worldwide. The occasional positive example would glimmer forth, but quickly be overshadowed by another dozen games lacking any effort to express the theme.

The failure to integrate the theme "As long as we have each other, we will never run out of problems" I found could be broken down into 6 common categories. The examples of good use of the theme were very particular, which I will cover later on.

They didn't even attempt it. They just didn't. No effort was made to integrate the theme into the design. I suppose some might have attempted to do so and just failed so badly there was no evidence of the attempt. Failure is still failure.

They didn't consider how the is applied between the two target groups or characters. The theme (if my understanding is correct) speaks of two mutually important individuals that are equally troubled by the presence of the other. They're causing problems for each other. Many games didn't balance the theme this way: often the trouble was one-sided, with the player's character suffering 100% of the problems and the sidekick character benefiting from the partnership, or being indifferent.

One of the two parties targeted by the theme was an object. Some teams went so far as to make the them between a character or group and an inanimate object. Speaking philosophically, an object is not a person and cannot think, express emotion and cannot react positively or negatively to a specific outcome. Therefore, they cannot suffer from 'trouble' in the first place, making the relationship once again one-sided.

Co-operation instead of conflict. Many teams included interaction between two principle characters (such as the French game *Together in the Dark*) where there was no conflict/trouble between the two. The characters worked together against *external* conflict that was a result of their surroundings, but not because they were together. In fact, more trouble would come of being separated that remaining together.

Lack of comprehension in application. This was harder to judge, but some teams just didn't understand the theme. And that's not to say they omitted it from their game: sometimes the phrase was prominently displayed somewhere in their game or in the website write-up. I couldn't see any correlation between the theme and they design or content: none. It's as if they had to tack on the phrase as a countermeasure because they weren't sure they'd followed it correctly.

Forced onto theme or design without explanation or context. Finally, some teams really just pasted it on to the their design in some form. As opposed to where they attempted it and it just didn't work, often the relationship in the gameplay was much closer to reflecting the theme than most teams . . . but the context for it's application made no sense. One game out of South Africa, *Deadly Synergy*, was about the players surviving against a horde of zombies. Okay, not original, but it works. However, if the players got too close to one another, they would slowly lose health. Thinking about the theme, I suppose that's trouble, and leaving would force them to fight zombies solo, but it doesn't make any sense. Why do they lose health? It was never explained, just forced onto the design.

Differences in Results

Through the following I will give a brief rundown of unique results I observed in each country's games. I will avoid mentioning anything mundane and focus more on the extreme ends of the spectrum for each category, should they merit mentioning.

Africa

South Africa

With only 3 games in total, Africa was among the few countries to have impressed me with a majority of their games. *Deadly Synergy* (one of the few zombie games) and *Battle of the Blobs* had simple content and poor integration, but fun and polished gameplay. Their ratio of good to bad games was much higher than most: they clearly succeeded at quality over quantity.

Asia

Israel

Demonstrating lower than average quality for execution and gameplay, none of the Israeli games really succeed in integration either. The best game I played from here, *Starry Starry Night*, was more about an aesthetic experience than the gameplay and challenge, and featured excellent graphics. One of few 'artistic' games.

The two other games worth mentioning were *Zero Punctuation* and *CARnage*. *Zero* was the first 'cop-out' game I found, where the graphics, gameplay and content were so terrible the game must have been made at the last minute or as a joke. Oddly, the team had some actual talent including a seemingly professional game developer and programmer, so I'm perplexed.

The other, *CARnage*, was quite sad. The game was about car bombing your boss in revenge for being fired. Terrorist activities and car bombs in the Middle East? I was hoping they'd avoid such negative stereotypes for content.

Japan

Japan was the most disappointing of all the countries involved for a completely unique reason. I consider Japan the godfather of the games industry, with a single man responsible for resurrecting the industry after the crash in the 70s and 80s. They continue to produce some of the world's best games, and are the home of both Sony and Nintendo.

All we managed to get out of them was 2 games from Kyoto, both by the same team and neither was complete. I understand the participants were from a real game company, too. I was hoping to see more from them, but I understand that the contacts of the IGDA might not extend into Japan.

Concerning the games, not much is noteworthy except for a reflection of Japanese game development stereotypes. This was the first country I encountered showing a game with robots for content, and the other has psychedelic graphics that remind me of several quite unconventional published Japanese games.

Turkey

Most of the Turkish games were broken or did not run on my computer, and those that were functional were so poorly executed gameplay was either frustrating or impossible. The sole gem, called *Lost Colours*, was one of many titles that completely omitted the controls in the game instructions. More importantly, this was one of the only games

where the characters possessed expressive faces that reacted emotionally to the game as it was played. Very impressive, and unique.

Europe

Belgium

Belgium had only 3 games, but in a rare twist all were fully functional. Major use of 3D graphics, and the style and visuals of the games was pretty well done, but the games suffered from a complete lack of playtesting. Non-violent with interesting designs for gameplay (especially the game *Haunted Monks*), they all needed severe playtesting to compensate for poor execution.

Denmark

With over a dozen games from the single participating city of Copenhagen, Denmark featured a larger catalogue of games than most countries. Overall, the level of quality for the games was good, with a great variety of content for their games.

The game *In One Piece* is my pick for one of the best games of the GGJ. Absolutely fantastic for 48 hours, give it a play. The content is nothing special, but it also succeeds in integrating the theme better than most. I couldn't stop playing it.

Also here was the first instance of metagaming (or quite close to, at least). The previously mentioned *4 minutes 33 seconds of Uniqueness* was made here, which does nothing but slowly change the screen colour until it changes completely, then you win. The game will quit *if* someone else launched the game anywhere else in the world. Very interesting content, but not exactly a game per se.

Finally, there's *Conflict Ball*. A group from the game company Watagames and ITU (with no credited designers, just programmers) made a game about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict with the intent to send a message that war is not a game. So they made the conflict into pinball. Really didn't work very well due to poor execution, and didn't convey the message in any convincing manner. For a team with industry developers, I was disappointed to see such a clumsy attempt. The team behind *In One Piece* didn't seem to have the same class of credentials, yet outperformed this team in every regard. Curious.

England

The British presented one of the most atmospheric and visually minimalist games of the GGJ, called *The Deep*. With interesting gameplay and good content that works fairly well at integrating the theme, it was sadly plagued with a lack of playtesting for the controls. Quite frustrating to control, but very engaging. Notably follows the common

'microscopic' context used by many others. It also used a 'looping' gameplay mechanic I did not see in any other games (but much like my game for IAT 410, actually).

Otherwise, the games from England shared nice a nice visual style, and one title called *MA* had an interesting approach to pathfinding by using indirect means to navigate an invisible maze. The game was broken, unfortunately.

Although nothing too exceptional, England had more unique and interesting gameplay mechanics than many countries.

France

Reflecting what may be an advanced understanding of the theme, the French had (overall) some of the best integration of the theme than any other country. They also had excellent graphics and style, good gameplay and polished execution. Overall, some of the highest quality I've seen.

The games *Reflecting Fool* and *Untitled Feelings* were my top picks from France, both with excellent visuals and intriguing gameplay, and good integration of the theme. Both need some tweaking, but not much. Each of the teams appear to be all from professional game companies or institutions, specifically explaining their quality. Considering Ubisoft is a French company, I'm not surprised that a number of talented developers from other game companies attended the GGJ.

Germany

With one of the only iPhone games, Germany had 2 out of 3 of their games about microscopic particles. I'm curious as to why this is so popular. Sadly, 1 of the games was broken, I don't have an iPhone and the third game was XNA, so I don't have anything more to say.

Ireland

A combination of poor integration and execution, the Irish games were unplayable for several reasons. One was completely broken, another was on XNA but described itself as an unfinished 'defend-your-base' style game (making it the first I encountered of its type), and the third required the purchase of a program called BlitzPlus. Nothing was playable.

Lithuania

Lithuania's participating city Vilnius was one of the few where I actually discovered what additional conditions being used to guide development. 'Patriotism' was the most significant of the 3, and was interpreted by most teams in their content through international warfare. A pessimistic and predictable approach, but I suppose many

found it an appropriate choice for the GGJ theme. Of them, the game *Missing Peace* was the most interesting, with traditional but very fun turn-based gameplay.

The games were almost completely produced in 3D as well, a rare thing: the style was never very impressive, though. All the games were in need of some playtesting.

One game, called *Border Trouble*, was about assisting illegal aliens across the Mexican border. I really don't know how they came up with this idea: it seems that most countries use cultures other than their own as context for their games (with the exception of Israel so far).

Netherlands

With 18 games coming out of Utrecht, this might be the single largest catalogue of games so far. They demonstrated top-notch style in their games with clever and polished art, nice aesthetics/atmosphere and interesting ideas for content and gameplay. Most were hampered by sub-par execution, but with the sheer quantity provided they displayed a treasure of interesting games. *Pushing Daisy*, a game about family and death with one of the most mature contexts I've seen. *Splice*, overall a very engaging and challenging game with lots of polish (also in the microscopic category). *Brothers in Arms*, a co-operative game about jellyfish.

And finally, *Bipole*, one of the best games of the GGJ. Integration of the theme only partially works, but otherwise this game is excellent in every way. Give it a play, I insist.

Norway

The Norwegian games were a mixed bag with more variety in quality and content than I've seen in most other countries. With content that covered animal games, microscopic games and even ninja, they certainly covered most of the commonly shared ideas. Style, execution and gameplay were all over the place, and there was little accurate integration of the theme. But there were a few interesting games:

SunBun, a game with nice graphics and interesting gameplay that needed some improved execution was apparently a visual metaphor for a mental disorder. I'm afraid I didn't quite understand it, but the overall concept was quite brave.

Lemming Condemning, a good game all-around.

One team was actually responsible for making 3 different games: *KissDeath*, *Loly Land* and *Redux*. Instead of making a single good game, they produced 3 sub-standard and mostly identical games. One of the best examples of poor planning and execution of any country: I don't understand why they did what they did.

One of my personal favourites of the whole GGJ was this game, called *Rowboat Hacker*. Playing as a hacker that hijacks a prison guard robot, you play through a fairly typical platformer by *typing* commands like 'right', 'left' or 'jump' instead of pressing single keys for each. Your repertoire would expand as you learned more commands, like 'plasma', which is revealed within the level's story. Such a great idea, a lot of fun, and completely unique in the entire GGJ! An excellent blend of old text based adventures and modern platforming.

The other game to catch my eye was . . . *LAI*, a play on the term for having sex. Based in Los Angeles, This was the very first game with nudity and sex, where fans are ripping the clothing off of a celebrity that you must protect en route to the limo. Success rewards you with a chain-saw for killing fans and an animation of you having sex with the celebrity. The game was terrible on just about every level, and so far the crudest of all the games I played, and one of the few based in a specific country that isn't the developer's home.

Scotland

3 of the 5 Scottish games were made in XNA, so I could only play the two remaining ones. Notable, neither of them provided instructions for the controls (the largest percentage so far), but were otherwise unmemorable. One of the XNA games, called *Johnny Fetus*, was about two alien fetuses surviving on a single feeding tube. As bizarre as it sounded, it actually integrated the theme very well, with both aliens fighting to get enough food to survive. Pleasantly surprising.

Spain

The only other game to feature nudity (on the title screen no less) was from Spain, but unfortunately it did not run. Some of the ideas for content were quite original, such as the moon escaping the sun, tending to a garden or expressing chaos through emptiness. None excelled in execution or gameplay, however, and another game (*Gino s Pizza*) was yet another game that took place in a country that was not the developer's home. It also used quite harsh Italian stereotypes in the website description.

Wales

Out of Newport in Wales comes another game based in Mexico, *La Rue on Holiday*. More interestingly, though, is that the first game to include alcohol is found: *Hokem Cokem*, where the characters are trying to make it home while drunk. Oddly, there's also a game about a homeless man: I see a recurring theme here.

In regards to style, Wales had the highest percentage of games with 8-bit graphics: all the games I played featured them. An interesting choice for aesthetics, but they can be very appealing when properly used. The best of these was *Lag*, an interesting flying/

dodging game where two characters are tied to one another (another common method of integrating the theme).

Most uniquely, Wales featured the only GGJ-parody game: *GGJGJG*. Quite amusingly, the player runs around smacking designers, programmers and artists to keep them awake and at work. One of the few successful attempts at comedy, what's interesting is how it expresses the common breakdown of skill sets in teams. Obviously individuals consider themselves as belonging to one of these key groups: they even have different kinds of computers typically associated with those roles.

The integration of theme for all of the games is still especially forced, though: more than many countries.

North America

Canada

Vancouver produced that largest number of working games from Canada, but please read my previous report for more details on them. With no small amount of pride I will admit that the Vancouver games (reflecting our games industry and institutions) were on average much better than the games produced in Sault Ste Marie, Toronto and Ottawa.

Across the rest of the country, the overall quality for style, execution, content and gameplay were sub-par, with the only game worth mentioning called *Illusionary PMS*, from Toronto. Interesting art and an amusing metaphor for tracking your progress, the game was one of the fastest and most frantic in the GGJ, which I enjoyed immensely (I've a weakness for speed-based gameplay).

The other title I will mention is on par with *LAID* for crudeness, called *Doctor Doctor Battle* from Sault Ste Marie. Using incredible obvious and offensive racial stereotypes, the game is so broken you can't even enter gameplay (you could at least that far in *LAID*). While another game from Toronto called *Blue Angels* I recognize as a 'cop-out' title, I understand that team made it in only 2 hours after failing to get their original idea working. *Doctor Doctor Battle* might be the single worst game of the entire GGJ.

Costa Rica

The games from San Jose excelled in style for visuals and animation, but almost all the games had severe problems with execution of gameplay. The lone playable game, *Platypus*, was barely even a game and featured extremely crude language and humour (it did, however, had a stronger integration of theme than most games). Graphics over gameplay was the case here: nothing else was really noteworthy.

USA

We finally come to the gaming juggernaut of the GGJ. With over 20 different locations participating, the USA had so many games I didn't have time to play them all.

Out of sheer numbers, the USA demonstrated a little bit of everything. Despite being one of the leading developers of games in the world, they still fell to issues that plagued other countries like playtesting, poor integration and commonly used content. Compared to most countries, on average they demonstrated enjoyable gameplay, good execution and polished graphics. Poor integration of theme, however.

They also have the most games I commend for varying reasons. *Fling* from Boston for gameplay; *Adventures of J and J* from Detroit for humour; *Circuit Breaker* from Albany for engagement and challenge; *Illusionary Persistence of Love* from Albany for concept; *12 AM* from New York - Columbia for retro style and gameplay; *Klish* from New York - Columbia for polish and gameplay and *Lucid* from New York - NYU for elegance, simplicity and style. The Americans simply delivered more enjoyable games than any other country, and these are only from the 8 cities that I played games from. Very impressive.

It was Boston that delivered the games of highest quality of those I played, with the artistic and engaging *Planet Deliverable* having great style, gameplay and execution. But nothing prepared me for Boston's *Move Mouse to Fulfill Destiny*.

Emotional, brilliantly simple and portrayed in a retro style, this is my pick for best in show of the GGJ. Beautiful and simple music assisting this game about life, friendship and accomplishment, and I played it over and over to create a better life for my character. So deceptively simple but brilliant in design and execution, if you haven't played this game I insist you do so immediately.

Oceania

Australia

Most of the Australian games were created with the same 3D engine, a decision that didn't work for many of the designs: most titles were in 2D and were sluggish because of the 3D implementation. They demonstrated some very nice style through 3D graphics, but suffered in the execution due to sluggish controls and poor playtesting.

One title I find interesting and amusing that was also the strongest game from Australia. The unfortunately named *Little Shop of Farters* had a crude context about farting to drive away competing shoppers, but proved to be surprisingly fun (although it pains me to admit it).

New Zealand

New Zealand had a fairly large catalogue of games, displaying a varying level of quality across all categories shared by many other countries. The exception lies in their style, in which about half of their games displayed excellent graphics: in particular *War Dance*, *TerrAqua* and *My Mate s Drunk*, the last of which also had one of the more accurate integration's of theme in the GGJ. It's also the only other drinking game in the entire event: the other is from Wales. If there are no other drinking games, that means they were all developed in countries of the Commonwealth. Interesting.

The top game from New Zealand I would argue is *Snow Lemmings*, a polished and enjoyable game where you save lemmings by rolling them up into a huge snowball as you hurtle it down a snowy mountain side. The game could use some tweaking in regards to difficulty and execution, but it's one of the most aesthetically pleasing games in the GGJ. The team must have had a real pro of an artist.

South America

Brazil

Of the 15+ games that were submitted from cities in Brazil, only 2 I could actually play for a variety of reasons. I believe this makes Brazil the country to deliver the highest percentage of broken games.

Odd, because the 2 games I could play were both quite good. *Flipped* from Recife had nice graphics, solid execution and gameplay, but required a little more depth to both game length, challenge and context.

The other title was a game called *Shoal*, also from Recife. What's interesting is that this game was the single most accurate integration of theme I encountered in the entire GGJ. Controlling a growing school of fish to capture larger fish (while dangerously attracting their attention the larger you become), the game is attractive and engaging. There are some issues with scale and slowdown as you progress, and there's no clearly stated goal, but for the only playable games out of Brazil that I played I was very impressed.

Venezuela

With only 2 playable titles out of the 5 from Caracas, Venezuela, did not have much for me to observe. Both of the games rated poorly across every category, with nothing noteworthy I can think to describe.

Conclusions

It was an arduous task, but playing those games was an interesting experience, and helped me put my own amateur skills (and those of my peers and Game Developers Club members) into perspective when viewed on a global scale.

What I realized first off was just how little culture and regional background could be used to predict aspects like creativity and interpretation of the GGJ's highly subjective theme. Of all places, I considered Brazil to have followed it most precisely, and out of Israel came a very creative game about stars in the sky. Despite this, advantages did go to regions with demonstrated strengths in the arts, mostly of European descent. France lead as the artistically superior region, dominating the categories of content and style: as a central hub of the art world with a rich heritage, this makes perfect sense. Most of the games I nominated for best in show, such as *Bipole*, *Reflecting Fool* and *In One Piece* all came from European countries, with only the American made *Move Mouse to Fulfill Destiny* equalling that status abroad. That isn't to say other regions didn't have quality games: every continent and almost every country provided at least a single game that captured my attention and respect.

What varied greatly from region to region was execution. Countries with known supporters of the games industry such as Norway, France, Denmark and the United States all demonstrated a higher than average level of stability: the United States in particular had an overwhelming number of functional games considering the sheer amount that were produced. Other regions, in particular South America and Asia. This may just be due to the representation of these regions at the GGJ and their communities for amateur development. After all, Asia includes both Japan and Korea, which make large quantities of excellent games. Despite this, Japan was barely included, and Korea not at all.

Involvement was also all over the chart: with Canada's proximity to the USA and our relative economic strength in the world, I'd anticipated a much greater showing by my country. Instead, countries like Brazil and the Netherlands surpassed us in sheer numbers, producing more games in a single city than all our cities combined. Region, economic strength and population did not directly represent the involvement of a country in the GGJ . . . with an exception to the USA, of course. If we are looking at population, though, the lack of Indian and Chinese involvement was a startling discovery: one third of the planet's population was completely missing. I'd at least expected the IGDA to successfully co-ordinate with what game development community there is in China. India's absence only surprises me due to their size: I realize their game development community is not very developed. On the flip side, Korea and Japan were the reverse. How could the IGDA be unable to draw more involvement from such reputable game development communities? Both countries have strong

industries, and their cultural passion for video games is second to none for their size. Startling.

I was impressed by many of the games created, but disappointed more frequently. So many titles were critically flawed in so many ways that I begin to wonder just how they managed to finish the game. I understand that there was only 48 hours to create the game from concept to finish, but some ideas were so rotten in the first place (ie. *Doctor Doctor Battle* and *LAI D*) how did they even convince themselves that it would be a good idea to pursue them? These are teams of people: how are the odds that 3 or 4 people could agree to create such a crude game so high?

This is reflected in the integration of the GGJ theme. Of the 110 games I played (and more that I studied through write-ups), perhaps 5 or less I described as being accurate enough to be worthy of praise. That's less than 5% of all the games I played. So few teams cared little about following the GGJ, else through sheer numbers I would have encountered more games that fit the bill. Perhaps this relates to willingness to explore new and original topics or ideas: I lost count just how many games were created about barnyard animals and microscopic objects. Participants must have resigned themselves to pursuing ideas that they knew to be safe and achievable, rather than risky and new. I would have seen far more games like *Move Mouse to Fulfill Destiny* otherwise.

In hindsight, I wonder if the GGJ draws any parallels to game ideation and creation in the industry. Looking at just how many middling games there are and how many good ones, the ratio seems to be similar. I find a good game to purchase once every couple of months, and there usually aren't even close to 300 professionally published games out every few months. Is this how many games are rejected before finally being published? How many reach the testing and research stage before being scrapped for another project? I wonder.

I may not have participated in the GGJ this year, but looking at the results I do feel more confident about my knowledge of game development and design techniques. I've been given a massive amount of examples (both good and bad) to consider when taking my own steps in developing an idea. I even hope to test my skills in a similar situation later this month during a Game Jam hosted my Game Development Club at SFU Surrey. This study has demonstrated that I possess at least some degree of regional advantage over many amateur developers in the world, but creativity is still a random factor not restricted by cultural boundaries.